

THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

pro bono humani generis

1230 YORK AVENUE - NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021-6399

Joshua Lederberg
UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

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Dr. Yuri Ghendon
Div. Maladies Transmissibles
WHO
CH-1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland

Dear Dr. Ghendon:

I am writing to you in your capacity of chairman of a roundtable on smallpox to be held at Glasgow in August.

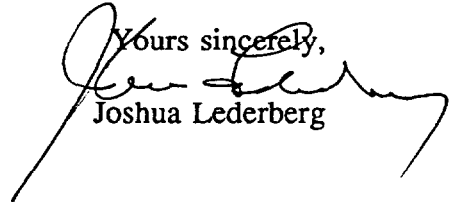
The issue under discussion is the multilateral policy on destruction of remaining smallpox stocks, in the wake of the global eradication campaign and of the DNA sequencing of some variola strains.

I wish to bring to your attention my own views on this matter. In addition a number of my colleagues who had initially favored that destruction, as a bilateral confidence-building-measure, now find little merit in that argument since the end of the Cold War.

There are many people who seek some psychic satisfaction in putting an end to smallpox "once and for all"; but I find this to be a small gain in contrast to the loss of scientific information entailed in the intentional destruction of an important pathogen, about which a great deal had already been learned. The safety hazards are small compared to many far more dangerous agents which it is important be handled in a highly secure and reassuring way. The same can be said for the possible abuse of smallpox as a military weapon. Such malice would earn the condemnation of humankind, but again this has little to do with a public rule about the disposition of these stocks.

You have a lengthy memorandum from Dr. L. S. Sandakhchiev, and it will save me time if I just indicate my concurrence with most of the arguments he has presented. In addition, I would add that it is very difficult to be certain that the DNA sequences recently achieved are absolutely reliable, without the further step of reconstruction of virulent variola from the information given -- probably more than would advocate at this time. Most importantly, it is hard to predict what new questions future science will adduce; while the destruction of strains would be irrevocable.

My specific suggestion is an agreed-upon moratorium on the destruction for at least one year, to allow time for further scientific deliberation. This would also give to develop the detailed administrative safeguards that may be needed to assure all qualified third parties that they will participate in oversight about security precautions and about the humanitarian purposes of future research on variola at the sites where these stocks can be licitly retained.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg